

King Lear

Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit

Study Guide

Act I, scene i

1. What is the question Lear asks his daughters before he makes the division of his kingdom final? What does he expect of his daughters?

Lear demands that his daughters affirm their love for him. He asks, “which of you shall we say doth love us most?” Lear expects his three daughters to offer him rivaling speeches and declarations of love and affection. However, Lear is looking for empty words and flatteries rather than an honest affirmation of love.

2. What is Cordelia’s answer to Lear’s question, and why is Lear outraged by Cordelia’s answer?

Cordelia declares that she has “nothing” to say to her father in order to deserve her inheritance. She also explains that she only loves Lear “according to [her] bond; nor more nor less.” Lear is disappointed because Cordelia has always been his favorite daughter. He expected her to top her sisters’ flattering speeches. However, Cordelia loves her father with the honest affections of a daughter and refuses to offer Lear the empty and meaningless flatteries he is looking for. Lear does not recognize Cordelia’s sincerity. He is outraged and eventually banishes Cordelia and renounces her as his daughter.

3. How does Kent’s reaction to Lear’s banishment of Cordelia introduce the theme of sight and insight?

Kent understands that Cordelia’s words have expressed true loyalty to her father. He subsequently warns Lear to “see better.” Kent wants Lear to understand that Cordelia’s answer is a more honest declaration of love than the words her sisters have spoken. He realizes that Lear is “blind”; Lear does not “see” true honesty and love. Kent understands that Lear is very superficial, and he offers to help Lear look beneath the surface of appearances and vague flatteries.

4. In this first scene of the play, how does Shakespeare establish the parallels between the stories of Lear and his daughters on the one hand and the story of Gloucester and his sons on the other hand?

The parallel between the two plotlines established in this first scene is based on the relationship between natural and unnatural affections and the inability of Lear and Gloucester to recognize the true characters of their children. Lear misjudges his three daughters. He believes that Goneril and Regan love him, while he insists that Cordelia is an unthankful child who is not deserving of her inheritance. Lear comes to this conclusion based on the artificial and superficial speeches Regan and Goneril have offered him. Gloucester differentiates between his children in a similar manner. He favors Edgar, who is his legitimate son, while he makes fun of Edmund, his son born out of wedlock. Both Gloucester and Lear do not carefully evaluate their children's characters and actions and only look at the surface of things to form their opinions.

5. Explain the ambiguous nature of Cordelia's farewell to her sisters: "The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes / Cordelia leaves you," particularly as she reveals the theme of sight and insight?

Cordelia's reference to her own "wash'd eyes" serves as an ambiguous statement that follows the sight and insight theme. Cordelia might refer to her own crying as she leaves her family, but, on another level, she might refer to her own clarity of vision, her insight and understanding into the true nature of her sisters' love for their father. Cordelia's eyes have been "washed" and she now sees clearly – she understands that her sisters have been insincere in their declarations of love to their father.

The expression "jewels of our father" also refers to the sight and insight theme. "Jewels" might serve as a synonym for eyes. Cordelia understands that her father falsely trusts her sisters. He "sees" things the way Regan and Goneril want him to see things. By looking at the world through the eyes of Regan and Goneril, Lear is misled and commits the mistake of banishing Cordelia and giving up his power.

6. How does Lear's "love test" foreshadow the way the plot is going to play out and suggest the primary character motivation for the action of the play?

By promising to divide his kingdom based on who loves him the most, Lear has essentially pitted daughter against daughter. This suggests that sibling rivalry is the predominant motivation.

7. What emotional reasons are suggested for Goneril and Regan's later treatment of their father and Cordelia?

Lear clearly favors Cordelia. He says he will divide his kingdom based on each daughter's profession of love, yet he gives each daughter her share before the others have spoken, saving the best portion for Cordelia. Clearly the two older sisters would envy their obviously-favored youngest sister and resent their father for his obvious favoritism.

8. What emotions are at the root of the Edmund/Edgar plot line?

Again, sibling rivalry and the desire for parental affection is at the heart of Edmund's decision to become a villain.

9. How has Lear himself upset the "natural order"?

Royalty is born to its rank, authority, and privileges. A proper king has an obligation to reign, not merely a prerogative. By abdicating his authority, Lear is essentially abandoning his rightful place in the Universe.

Act I, scene ii

1. What information is contained in the letter that Edmund pretends to conceal from his father?

Edmund holds a letter he forged in his brother Edgar's hand to himself. In the letter, Edgar presumably laments the fact that his father is still alive. He expresses his desire to possess his father's lands and possessions, and he vows to share these goods with his brother. The letter expresses the opinion that when parents reach old age, they should give up everything they own to their children.

2. What does Edmund suggest his father should do to confirm the contents of the letter?

Edmund conceives a situation in which his father can secretly overhear a conversation between his sons.

3. What do Gloucester's and Edmund's comments about the constellations of the stars reveal about their individual beliefs in the power of the stars or fate?

Gloucester expresses his belief that the constellations of the stars are responsible for the mischief that is happening in the world. He associates Edgar's presumed conspiracy and other recent events in the kingdom with "late eclipses in the sun and moon." Edmund, on the other hand, does not believe that the stars influence human existence. He recognizes that many people, including his father, look to the stars for answers instead of taking personal responsibility for their actions and for the events that occur around them.

4. Where does Edmund send his brother Edgar as the scene draws to a close?

Edmund invites Edgar to his house where he promises him shelter and protection from their father's wrath.

Act I, scene iii

1. What concerns about Lear's intentions does Goneril express during her conversation with Oswald?

Goneril fears that even though Lear has divided his kingdom and given up his power, he will continue to demand control and authority. Goneril compares her father to an old man who acts like a child and must be treated accordingly. She uses this analogy to justify her disrespectful behavior and her subsequent decisions.

2. Whom does Goneril decide to contact by letter at the end of the scene, and why?

Goneril vows to write to her sister to ensure that both of them are on the same page when it comes to the treatment of their father. She wants to ensure that Regan, too, does not want their father to retain any degree of power and authority. In writing a letter, she takes the first step in developing the filial conspiracy against Lear.

Act I, scene iv

1. How does Kent's disguise support the theme of sight and insight?

The banished Kent assumes a disguise and subsequently offers his services to Lear. He knows that Lear does not want to see "Kent" again, but he hopes that he can still be of service to the former King. Kent wants to prove his loyalty to Lear by serving him and offering him valuable advice, even if he does not receive credit as the former Kent. The disguise Kent assumes supports the theme of sight and insight by demonstrating that Lear must learn not to judge people according to their exterior appearances and superficial behaviors. Lear has banished Kent rashly based on a hasty decision, but he eagerly accepts the disguised Kent into his service, because Kent's loyalty and good character remain unchanged.

2. Why does Kent trip Oswald?

Kent wants to teach Oswald a lesson, because Oswald treats Lear with disrespect. Oswald does not listen to Lear's commands and treats him like his "lady's father" rather than the King or an authority figure. Kent also trips Oswald because he wants Lear to recognize his loyalty; he wants to gain Lear's trust and respect.

3. What wisdom does the Fool express about possessions on the one hand and about “nothing” on the other hand?

The Fool indicates that Lear was wrong to give up control over his kingdom. He believes that Lear falsely relied on the goodwill of his daughters. Now that Lear must realize that his daughters do not allow him to retain a certain degree of authority and power, he must recognize that he has lost all of his possessions and lands. All that is left is “nothing.”

The Fool also asks Lear “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” This question likely refers to Act I, scene i, when Cordelia is banished because she offers “nothing” to her father. The Fool suggests that the “nothing” Cordelia had to offer is, in fact, more valuable than any material goods or lands. Cordelia’s “nothing” was her avowal of true affection and undying love.

4. Why is Lear angry at Goneril?

Goneril is criticizing the behavior of Lear’s followers. She claims that his knights are behaving in an unruly, loud, and disruptive manner. She has therefore decided to send away fifty of Lear’s followers and demands that only a few remain and behave in an orderly fashion. Goneril also criticizes the behavior of Lear’s Fool.

5. What do Lear’s hundred knights come to represent in this scene? Why is Goneril’s threat to send fifty away such an important issue?

Lear’s hundred knights represent Lear’s status and authority as king. To diminish his retinue is to diminish his authority. The irony is that Lear abdicated all of his authority when he gave his land and his power to his daughters.

6. What is Lear’s curse on Goneril?

Lear calls on the gods to make Goneril sterile so that she can never experience the joys of having a grateful child. He contends that, if Goneril must have a child, it should be deformed and a cause of pain, worry, and concern rather than pleasure and happiness.

7. What does Goneril’s reaction to Lear’s curse reveal about her character?

Goneril entirely disregards Lear’s severe curse. She shows virtually no emotional reaction upon hearing her father’s condemning words but remains cold and unmoved. Her behavior reveals her heartless and unfeeling character.

- What does Lear vow to do in the face of Goneril's behavior and how realistic are his threats?

Lear vows to appeal to his other daughter Regan for help, shelter, support, and justice. He also threatens to re-assume his royal power and revenge Goneril by stripping her of the power and lands he had originally assigned to her. At this point, Lear still feels strong and does not realize that his decision to divide his kingdom was final and cannot be reversed.

- What does Goneril command Oswald to do at the close of the scene and why?

Goneril asks Oswald to carry a letter to her sister Regan in which she explains everything that has occurred between her and her father. She wants to press Regan to deny their father the same privileges she has denied him. Goneril is concerned that Regan may allow Lear to retain all of his knights, and she fears that she may then be the "evil" daughter in the eyes of their father. Assuring that Regan is on the same page as her sister when it comes to the treatment of Lear is one of the recurring elements of the filial conspiracy plot.

Act I, scene v

- Where does Lear send Kent?

Lear sends Kent to Gloucester with letters that explain the treatment he has received from Goneril. Lear hopes to receive better treatment from Regan once he meets her at Gloucester's castle.

- What does the Fool criticize in his statement to Lear, "thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise"?

The Fool knows that Lear gave up his kingdom and his power prematurely. He criticizes Lear for acting rashly. The Fool's comment also indicates his belief that old age and wisdom do not always go hand in hand. Although Lear was approaching old age, he did not yet possess wisdom and self-knowledge. Thus, he made the wrong decision in splitting up his kingdom.

- What is significant about Lear's "prayer" not to go mad?

First, this foreshadow's Lear's later madness. Secondly, it establishes that Lear's madness will be the result of, and will mirror, the lack of order and "rightness" in the natural world, as evidenced by his daughters' treatment of their father.

Act II, scene i

1. What rumor of political upheaval reaches the castle of Gloucester?

The rumor spreads that there is a growing division between the houses of Albany and Cornwall that might lead to war.

2. Why does Edmund injure himself to draw blood?

Edmund falsely convinces his brother Edgar that there exists a widespread suspicion that Edgar is planning to murder his father. Under pretence of offering him assistance, Edmund presses Edgar to flee the country. He pretends to be fighting with Edgar when Gloucester enters. Once Edgar flees the scene, Edmund injures himself in order to pretend to his father that Edgar attacked him violently, injured him, and threatened to kill their father.

3. How does Gloucester react when he learns about Edgar's alleged intentions to attack and murder him?

Gloucester vows to chase Edgar until the presumably unfaithful son is caught and brought to justice. He threatens to punish everyone who offers the fleeing Edgar refuge.

4. How does the conversation between Gloucester and Edmund, following Edgar's escape, signal a reversal of the relationships that Edgar and Edmund have with their father?

Once Gloucester has vowed to chase and capture Edgar, he renounces Edgar as his legitimate son. Gloucester claims, "I never got him," thus denying the legitimacy of the father-son relationship. At the same time, Gloucester elevates Edmund's status as a son by calling him "loyal and natural boy." The roles of Edgar and Edmund are reversed arbitrarily by the angry Gloucester. Edgar loses his rights and privileges as a rightful son, whereas Edmund gains Gloucester's respect and fatherly love.

5. How does Gloucester's expression "my old heart is crack'd, is crack'd" illustrate the parallel between Gloucester and Lear when it comes to old age and their relationships with their children?

Like Lear, Gloucester is beginning to feel his approaching old age. He has always counted on his children, and – brought on by Edmund's evil scheme – he now fears that he has never known the true character of his children. Both Lear and Gloucester lament that their hearts are being broken at this late stage in their lives. They feel abused and taken advantage of. They feel that they deserve the love and respect of their children, and their disappointed expectations break their hearts.

Act II, scene ii

1. What does Kent say about Oswald's character when he metaphorically claims "a tailor made thee"?

Kent believes that Oswald is dimwitted and has no character. He uses the metaphor of being "tailor-made" to express his conviction that Oswald is Goneril's puppet and acts only according to her will.

2. Why does Kent attempt to dissuade Cornwall and Regan from putting him in the stocks?

As the messenger of King Lear, Kent expects to be treated with a certain degree of respect. He believes that his master, the King, will be outraged when he finds his servant in the stocks. Kent expresses his belief that putting him in the stocks is a direct offense against the King.

3. How does Gloucester's response to Kent's being put in the stocks reflect the parallel between Gloucester's and Lear's relationships with their children?

Gloucester defends Kent and pleads with Cornwall not to put Kent in the stocks. He is convinced that Lear will be angry once he finds that his messenger has been treated with disrespect by his own daughter and her husband. Gloucester can sympathize with Lear's potential reaction because he, too, is struggling with disrespect from his children. At this point, Gloucester believes that his son Edgar is a traitor who is trying to kill his father. Due to his own experiences, Gloucester is learning to become more sensitive when it comes to parent-child relationships.

4. On what does Kent base his hopes for the future at the end of the scene, once he has been put in the stocks?

Kent counts on Cordelia, who, he believes, has heard about the recent events in the kingdom, to avenge the treatment her father has received. He also calls on fortune and begs her to cast a friendly eye on his miserable situation.

5. How does the Gloucester plot continue to parallel the main plot? What does Shakespeare achieve by keeping the two plots so carefully parallel?

Gloucester puts his trust in the wrong son just as Lear trusted the wrong daughters. Gloucester's honest and loving son is run off just as Lear banished his one honest and loving daughter. Shakespeare uses the parallel plots to remind the audience that the issues underlying all of the plot events are family relationships, both between siblings and between parents and children.

Act II, scene iii

1. What decision does Edgar make that will help him hide from the authorities that are chasing him?

Edgar disguises himself as a lunatic beggar who is roaming the countryside. He calls himself poor Tom.

2. How does Edgar's statement "Edgar I nothing am" demonstrate the connection between the recurring "nothing" motif and the natural order of family relations?

Edgar sheds his former identity as the legitimate son of Gloucester. He realizes that "nothing" is left of his former life; he is merely a persecuted and falsely accused man. By calling his former identity "nothing," Edgar demonstrates his recognition that his birthright, his legitimate birth, and the "natural" family order he has always believed in are, in fact, meaningless and amount to "nothing." The natural order of family relations ultimately does not or cannot determine or guarantee personal relationships between human beings. Human beings must instead consider one another's character as the foundation of a relationship.

Act II, scene iv

1. What answer does Lear receive upon his request for admittance into the presence of Regan and Cornwall?

Regan and Cornwall refuse to see Lear when he arrives at Gloucester's castle. They claim to be tired from their long journey.

2. How does Lear respond to Regan's welcome?

Lear is angry and threatens to renounce Regan as his lawful daughter if she does not receive him properly. Once he realizes that Kent has been freed from his stocks, his disposition changes. He becomes friendly and kind and entrusts Regan with information about the terrible treatment he has received from Goneril. He hopes to be treated better by Regan. Lear's mood changes quickly, which could be an indication of his developing insanity.

3. How does Regan respond to Lear's complaints about Goneril?

Regan immediately reminds Lear of his old age and claims that the elderly should be guided by their children because they are unable to make reasonable decisions on their own. She urges Lear to return to Goneril and apologize for his unreasonable demands.

4. Why does Lear believe that Regan will treat him with more respect than Goneril? What idea does Lear still cling to?

Lear believes that Regan will treat him with respect because he hopes that she knows the “offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.” Lear still believes that Regan is bound to him based on the natural order of family relations. He insists that Regan must love him because she is his lawful child, and he expects her gratitude for the generous portion of the kingdom she has received from her father. Lear has not yet learned that natural family relations do not necessarily coincide with love and respect. He must learn to look beneath the superficial level of a person’s character to see who that person really is. Family relations are no guarantee of love.

5. What question does Lear continue to ask that Regan will not answer?

Lear demands to know who put his messenger in the stocks.

6. What is Regan’s response when Lear says that he and his knights will have nothing to do with Goneril and that he plans to move to her house instead?

Regan responds by explaining that her home is not equipped to lodge him and his followers. She claims that one hundred knights are too many to house. Regan suggests that Lear should cut the number of his followers to fifty. Then she reconsiders and tells Lear to reduce his retinue to twenty-five.

7. What revenge does Lear swear on both of his daughters?

Lear promises to avenge himself against both Regan and Goneril. However, he is unable to formulate a precise plan for his revenge. He vows to do “terrible things,” yet he is unsure what exactly he will do. Lear is beginning to realize that he has no more power and cannot reclaim his authority and possessions. Essentially, there is nothing he can do to revenge his daughters. Lear fears that he is losing his mind because of the horrible treatment he has received.

8. What makes the sisters’ actions at the end of this act seem particularly cruel?

A violent storm is approaching and Regan and Goneril retreat into the castle. However, they claim that the house is too small to house Lear and his followers. They instruct Gloucester to lock the gate and leave Lear outside, left to fend for himself in the ensuing storm. The daughters seem especially cruel in this scene because they display no emotion at the thought of their old father spending the night in the rain. They claim that Lear has brought the situation upon himself.

9. What two events signal the end of Lear's status as king and father?

First, Lear kneels to beg his daughter for protection. A king would never kneel in supplication to a subject and a father would never kneel in supplication to a daughter. Secondly, the daughters whittle away Lear's retinue until he is a man alone with no servant, no status, no authority, and apparently no loved ones.

10. What does the storm represent in this scene and the scenes that follow?

The storm represents both the turbulence in Lear's own mind and the fact that the natural order has been upset (remember the strange weather the night before Julius Caesar's assassination, and the reported weather the night of Duncan's murder in Macbeth). The king has abandoned his rightful post. Daughters have unnaturally betrayed their father and nearly stripped him of his humanity ("reason not the need..."). A son is likewise plotting against his father and brother, and a bastard son is being preferred to the legitimate son. There is much disorder in the universe, and this is reflected in the storm.

Act III, scene i

1. What news about Albany, Cornwall, and the King of France does Kent reveal to the Gentleman?

Kent explains to the Gentleman that the division between Albany and Cornwall has intensified. He also reveals that the King of France plans to invade the country and has, in fact, already landed with his troops on the shores of Dover.

2. What mission does Kent ask the Gentleman to complete?

Kent sends the Gentleman to Dover where he must meet Cordelia and inform her of all the mischief that has happened. He gives a ring to the Gentleman that he can present to Cordelia so that she will recognize him as a messenger from Kent.

Act III, scene ii

1. In Lear's first speech in this scene, how does Shakespeare portray the great emotional upheaval going on within Lear's mind?

Lear defies the storm, telling nature to destroy the earth and everything in it, himself included, but especially "ungrateful" children. The growing confusion in his mind is mirrored by the ferocity of the storm.

2. What comment about women does Lear make in his speech?

Lear remarks that “there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass.” Lear believes that all women are preoccupied with their physical appearance and rehearse their behavior and gestures in front of the mirror.

3. What is Kent’s opinion of the storm’s ferocity?

Kent considers the storm to be the worst he has ever experienced. He believes that it is impossible for humans to survive the storm without shelter.

4. How does Lear’s remark “I am a man more sinn’d against than sinning” reflect his development as a human being within the play?

Lear recognizes that he has made many severe mistakes. He is beginning to realize that some of his long-held assumptions about human nature and relationships are invalid and meaningless. However, even though he recognizes his errors, he does not believe that he deserves to be in the wilderness exposed to a terrible storm. He believes that the sins his daughters Regan and Goneril have committed against him, the disrespect they have shown him, surpass any of the mistakes he has made in his life.

5. How does the Fool evaluate the state of Britain in his closing “prophecy”?

In this ironic speech, the Fool expresses his disillusionment with the state of Britain. He prophesies an imaginary time when all evil, cheating, etc., will cease to exist. According to the Fool, this time will never come; he believes that Britain is so absorbed by corruption and evil that it would be difficult or impossible for things to change.

Act III, scene iii

1. How do Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall react to Gloucester’s request to pity the King?

They instantly deprive Gloucester of his privilege to use his own house. He has also been ordered not to mention the King’s name again.

2. What information does Edmund share with the audience after his father tells him about the “dangerous” letter and subsequently exits the stage?

Edmund reveals to the audience that he is going straight to the Duke with the information he has received about the approaching troops of the King of France. He hopes that everything his father loses will be given to him.

Act III, scene iv

1. How does Lear explain his approaching insanity?

Lear compares his state of mind to the storm that is raging outside. He states, “the tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling.” Lear feels overwhelmed by the many conflicting thoughts that occupy his mind and cloud his ability to think clearly and reasonably. He blames his sickly disposition on the “filial ingratitude” of his daughters.

2. In which lines in this scene is Edgar’s speech filled with alliterations?

Abundant alliteration occurs in the following lines: “The foul fiend follows me,” and “...the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame, through ford....”

3. Upon seeing Edgar emerge from the hovel disguised as poor Tom, what does Lear immediately assume has happened to Edgar?

Lear immediately assumes that Edgar’s fate is the same as his own. He believes that Edgar has given up his possessions to his daughters and that he has been mistreated and sent out into the storm, just as he has.

4. How does Edgar respond to Lear’s assumptions?

Edgar begins to paraphrase a list of rules that resembles the Ten Commandments, among them “obey thy parents.”

5. Why does Lear tear off his clothes?

When he exclaims “thou art the thing itself,” Lear seems to recognize that Edgar represents the basic essence of a human being – a man who is without possessions, home, friends, or obligations and who is on the same level as animals. He also sees that he, the King, is in no better position than the beggar poor Tom. He tears off his clothes to demonstrate what he has in common with poor Tom: they both have nothing.

6. How does Gloucester’s appearance at the hovel illustrate the parallel structure between the Lear-daughters plot and the Gloucester-sons subplot?

When Gloucester arrives at the hovel, he explains that he felt obligated to assist the King, even though Goneril and Regan have forbidden him to look for Lear. He recognizes that the King is undergoing the same experience he is undergoing with his own children. He believes that his son set out to kill him, and he fears that Regan and Goneril plan a similar fate for their father. Gloucester has begun his journey toward insight – he identifies with the King, because he recognizes himself in the King’s suffering.

7. What trait is Lear developing as a result of his daughter’s treatment? How does this trait affect Lear’s status as a tragic hero?

Lear is developing a sense of human compassion. He recognizes that, when he was King, he did not think at all about the poor and homeless, who are also suffering in this storm. This compassion begins to make Lear a sympathetic character so that his final tragedy might evoke the necessary pity from the audience.

Act III, scene v

1. What is Edmund's reward upon reporting Gloucester's alleged sympathies for the King of France to the Duke?

Edmund receives his father's title "Earl of Gloucester."

2. How does Edmund misrepresent his family obligations to the Duke?

Edmund leads the Duke to believe that it is difficult for him to go against his father because of the family ties that bind them together. He pretends to value and respect his father according to the natural order of family relations. Yet, he flatters the Duke by claiming that loyalty to the Duke is more important than his responsibilities as a son.

3. What is Edmund's attitude toward the concept of loyalty and what does it reveal about his character?

Edmund pretends to feel a strong sense of loyalty toward the Duke. He claims that his loyalty even exceeds his filial obligations to his father. In reality, however, Edmund is a character who is loyal only to himself. He answers to no one and plays everyone against one another. He is a manipulator who is only interested in personal gain.

4. What does the Duke promise Edmund?

The Duke promises to treat Edmund with the affections of a father if he is willing to go against his own father, Gloucester.

Act III, scene vi

1. What imaginary event does Lear stage once he has entered the farmhouse chamber?

Lear stages a mock trial in which he prosecutes his two daughters Goneril and Regan.

2. What does Lear accuse Goneril of during his imaginary trial?

Lear claims that Goneril "kicked the poor king her father."

3. Why does Edgar fear his true identity might be exposed and how does the audience learn about his concerns?

Edgar can barely keep his tears back as he watches Lear proceed through the mock trial. He is overwhelmed with pity and fears that he is not able to continue speaking in the language of mad Tom. Edgar addresses the audience in a soliloquy and expresses his concerns.

4. What news does Gloucester deliver upon his arrival?

Gloucester has overheard the plot to kill Lear. He urges Kent and the Fool to convey Lear to Dover where Cordelia and the King of France have landed.

5. How does Lear's suffering impact Edgar's disposition?

After seeing Lear's suffering, Edgar feels that he is now able to carry his own load a little more easily. He claims that "when we our betters see bearing woes, we scarcely think our miseries our foes." Edgar also expresses his belief that shared suffering alleviates individual pain. He realizes that he is not the only person who has had to endure hardship, and he gains strength from the presence of others who have also suffered.

Act III, scene vii

1. Why does Cornwall order his servants to pursue Gloucester?

He declares Gloucester a traitor because Gloucester is communicating with the King of France and Cordelia.

2. How does Cornwall vow to treat Gloucester once he has been found?

Cornwall vows to turn his anger on Gloucester and let him feel his wrath. However, he knows that, by law, he cannot simply kill Gloucester without a trial.

3. Why does Gloucester consider Regan's and Cornwall's behavior toward him inappropriate?

Gloucester reminds Regan and Cornwall that they are guests in his house and that, as their host, he should be treated with some respect.

4. What information do Regan and Cornwall demand from Gloucester?

They demand to know where Gloucester has sent King Lear.

5. What image does Gloucester evoke in the following lines he speaks to Regan: "Because I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs"?

The lines evoke an image of cruelty and viciousness. Gloucester compares the actions of the two sisters to the brutal actions of a vulture or a predatory animal.

6. How does this image of the two sisters compare to their words of affection they uttered in the opening scene of the play?

In the first scene of the play, Goneril claims that she loves Lear more than words can say and that her father is “dearer than eye-sight” to her. Her recent actions reveal her deceptive nature; she is now displaying hatred and cruelty toward her father. The empty words Goneril offered in the opening scene of the play have, all along, been meaningless and self-serving. Goneril is revealed as a selfish and heartless woman who has lied to her father about her true feelings.

7. Why does the servant interfere with the proceedings in Gloucester’s castle and what do his actions reveal about his character?

The servant is trying to stop Cornwall from blinding Gloucester completely by putting out both of his eyes. He recognizes the injustice and cruelty of the actions that are unfolding in front of his eyes, and he addresses Cornwall with the words “I have served you ever since I was a child; But better service have I never done you than now to bid you hold.” The servant’s actions reveal his just character. He does not blindly follow the orders of his lord but evaluates the actions he sees according to the principles of humanity and fairness.

8. What startling news about Edmund does Gloucester learn from Goneril?

Gloucester learns that Edmund has betrayed him and falsely accused his brother Edgar.

9. What theme is advanced by the gouging out of Gloucester’s eyes?

It is in the process of becoming physically blind that Gloucester learns the truth about Edgar and Edmund and how “blind” he has been to the truth. This advances the theme of sight and insight.

10. What is significant about the servant’s challenging Cornwall about his treatment of Gloucester?

Two disruptions of the natural order are illustrated here. First, just as daughters and sons have turned against their parents, so also do servants challenge their masters. Secondly, the royal and noble classes were believed to be (and considered themselves to be) materially better than the lower classes. Yet, in this instance, we see the noble traits of mercy and justness displayed by the actions of the servant, while the master is cruel and unjust.

Act IV, scene i

1. What does Edgar mean when he says “the worst is not so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’”?

Edgar expresses his belief that as long as a man can think that his fortunes are at their lowest point, the man can sink even further. Only when one is dead can he or she be at the “worst.”

2. How does the following statement by Gloucester contribute to the theme of sight and insight: “I have no way and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw”?

Gloucester has now fully realized how foolish and superficial he acted when he was still in control of his life. He knows that when he was healthy and still had eyes, he was “blind” on the inside and unable to distinguish between human goodness and evil. Thus, he “stumbled” and lost everything, because he banished his good son, Edgar, and believed the lies of his scheming son, Edmund. Gloucester regrets not having evaluated his sons’ characters more closely, according to their behavior. Gloucester feels lost not because he does not have any eyes, but because he has judged his sons wrongly and made a severe mistake when he banished Edgar.

3. To what degree does Gloucester attribute influence and power to fate and the gods? Where in this scene does his belief become obvious?

Gloucester claims, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” He believes that the gods, or supernatural influences, determine the fates of human beings. According to Gloucester, the gods arbitrarily decide each human being’s fate. The gods are playing with human life as if they were little boys torturing flies. Playing with humans is merely a sport for the gods.

4. What can be inferred from Gloucester’s last comments about his attitude toward fate?

Gloucester wants Edgar to take him to a cliff near Dover so that he can commit suicide by jumping to his death. Gloucester is disillusioned and willing to take fate into his own hands; he is no longer willing to have the wheel of fortune turn any way it chooses. He will turn the wheel himself and end his life. He still believes that he is powerless in the face of the gods or fate and fortune, but he is willing to commit suicide to end his dependence on the arbitrary power of the gods.

5. What climactic moment might Gloucester’s lament about the capriciousness of the gods signify?

Gloucester has reached the point of utter hopelessness. There is no hope of help from fellow human beings, and there is no hope of help from the gods for whom we are mere playthings.

Act IV, scene ii

1. What does Albany's reaction to his wife's treatment of her father reveal about his character?

Albany is appalled by Goneril's actions. He feels that Goneril and Regan have mistreated their father and shown him nothing but disrespect. He states, "What have you done? Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd? A father, and a gracious aged man . . . have you madded." Clearly, Albany is a good man. He did not know his wife was capable of such horrible behavior, and he feels that Lear deserves respect and dignity.

2. What climax has occurred between the end of the previous scene and Albany's condemnation of his wife's actions?

The fact that Albany has changed from being an ally of his wife and her sister, to opposing them. This is the first sense of redemption in the play, the first glimmer of hope after Gloucester's utter hopelessness in the previous scene. When Albany hears of Cornwall's death, he claims that the gods do provide justice, not the mere random suffering Gloucester lamented earlier.

3. How are Goneril's feelings toward Edmund portrayed in this scene?

Goneril appears to develop a lustful longing for Edmund. She gives him a token of her love and, with a kiss, makes him her confidante.

4. What attitude toward her husband does Goneril display when she calls him a "milk-liver'd man"?

Goneril does not have any respect for her husband. She believes that he is a weak human being who does not dare to assert his power over others.

5. What is Albany's reason for not attacking Goneril?

Albany is extremely angry with Goneril and outraged at her actions. However, he does not attack her because she is a woman, and he considers it unfit for a man to attack a woman physically. He states, "howe'er thou art a fiend, a woman's shape doth shield thee."

6. What news about the Duke of Cornwall does the messenger reveal?

The messenger reports that the Duke of Cornwall is dead. He was killed by the servant who attempted to keep him from blinding Gloucester completely.

7. What does Albany learn about Edmund and what is his resolution?

The messenger informs Albany that it was Edmund who brought about Gloucester's capture. He explains that Edmund not only allowed but encouraged Cornwall to pluck out Gloucester's eyes. Albany vows to avenge Gloucester's fate. Since the Cornwall, who blinded Gloucester, is already dead, he will likely pursue Edmund in order to avenge poor Gloucester.

8. How does the relationship between Goneril and Regan change as the scene draws to a close?

Regan and Goneril, who have previously schemed together against their father, now seem to turn on each other. Due to her growing infatuation with Edmund, Goneril becomes jealous of her sister, whom she suspects of wanting Edmund for herself. Now that her sister's husband is dead, Goneril fears that Regan will take advantage of her widowhood and lay claim to Edmund.

Act IV, scene iii

1. What effect does Shakespeare create by having the French king return to France and leaving Cordelia in Dover to command the French troops?

The approaching battle will essentially be between the three sisters. What seems like a major political, international conflict still boils down to a family crisis.

2. What information does Kent seek from the messenger?

Kent wants to know why the King of France has returned to France, and who is left behind in his place to fight against Britain. He is particularly interested in finding out how the letters he sent to Cordelia were received. Kent is eager to hear that Cordelia was moved when she heard about her father. He is relieved to ascertain that Cordelia is not as evil as her sisters but, indeed, a loving and caring daughter to her father. This is what Kent believed all along, and he feels reassured by the reports he receives from the messenger.

3. What is Shakespeare suggesting when he has the Gentleman describe Cordelia's crying as: "she shook / the holy water from her heavenly eyes"?

Cordelia's honest love for her father—especially contrasted with her sisters' betrayal—has elevated Cordelia to the status of a revered saint.

- How does Kent reconcile the differences between Lear's daughters? How does he explain their different behaviors?

Kent attributes the different behaviors of the three daughters to the influence of the stars. He claims, "It is the stars, the stars above us, govern our conditions; else one self mate and mate could not beget such different issues." Looking at the stars for answers is the only way for Kent to explain how three daughters, who are so different from one another, could have been born to the same parents.

- Why does Lear refuse to see Cordelia?

Lear is ashamed of his past actions. He regrets the way he has treated Cordelia, and he feels unworthy to be in Cordelia's presence.

Act IV, scene iv

- What does Cordelia promise for any help anyone can offer her father?

Cordelia offers all of her material possessions to anyone who has a cure for her father's afflictions.

- According to Cordelia, what is the ultimate reason for the French army's attack?

Cordelia states, "No blown ambition doth our armies incite, but love, dear love, and our aged father's right." Cordelia explains that Britain must be invaded in order for the King of France to defeat Regan and Goneril. It is Cordelia's sole purpose to avenge the treatment her father has received at the hand of her sisters. She cites love as the only ambition that drives her forward. Cordelia now makes good on her initial promise to love her father "according to her bond" that she uttered in the opening scene of the play. To her heart-felt words,, Cordelia now brings decisive actions. She will defend her father's honor with the help of the French army.

- Why does Shakespeare decide to have the King of France return home and leave Cordelia as the major force opposing her sisters?

Dramatically, sister is pitted against sister; historically, the play was put on before English audiences. As much as they may have hated Regan and Goneril, it would have been difficult for this type of audience to watch a French king defeat an English monarch, even a bad one. In addition, the theme of revenge can be resolved with more force if Cordelia is intimately involved.

Act IV, scene v

1. Why does Regan consider it be necessary to find Gloucester and kill him?

Regan believes that the blind Gloucester will arouse sympathy for himself and hatred against the conspirators wherever he wanders.

2. Why does Regan want to open the letter her sister has written to Edmund?

Regan is jealous of her sister. She does not want Oswald to deliver the letters Goneril has written to Edmund. She knows that Goneril does not love her husband, and she is afraid that, if Edmund receives Goneril's letter, he will serve Goneril and become her lover. Regan, however, wants Edmund for herself. She claims that Edmund is better suited for her because she is a widow, whereas her sister's husband is still alive.

3. How does the dialogue between Regan and Oswald in this scene reveal Oswald's character?

Oswald is revealed as an extremely opportunistic and power-hungry character. He immediately sides with Regan once she promises him a reward for finding and killing Gloucester. Oswald is not interested in right or wrong. He only wants to gain material goods by siding with the most powerful party.

Act IV, scene vi

1. What is Gloucester's intention upon reaching Dover?

Gloucester intends to jump off the cliff and kill himself.

2. Gloucester, thinking he is throwing himself from the cliff, falls forward on the ground and faints. Edgar, now assuming the character of a man who happened to pass by the cliff as Gloucester was jumping, revives him and tells his father it is a miracle that he was not killed by falling off the cliff. What does Gloucester resolve?

Gloucester believes Edgar's suggestion that he has been saved by the grace of the gods. He now vows to bear the affliction of blindness with strength and live out his life until its natural end. He concludes that it must have been the devil in disguise who led him to attempt suicide.

3. How does Edgar influence Gloucester's decision to live, especially considering the theme of natural order of the stars?

Edgar plays on his father's unshaken belief in fate and the power of the stars. He states, "Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee." Edgar knows that it will motivate his superstitious father to believe that his life has been spared by the gods.

4. Explain the irony that dominates the following lines uttered by Lear upon seeing Gloucester: "GLOUCESTER: Dost thou know me? LEAR: I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squint at me?"

Lear clearly recognizes Gloucester, and he believes that he recognizes him by his eyes. The lines are ironic because Gloucester has been blinded. His eyes have been plucked out. Again, Shakespeare is playing on the theme of sight and insight. He hints to the audience that Lear cannot possibly remember Gloucester for his eyes. He must, therefore, judge and remember Gloucester according to the service he has shown to the King. Lear is beginning to learn to look beneath the surface of physical appearances to recognize loyalty.

5. How does the following line spoken by Lear reinforce the ambiguous theme of natural family order: "Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father than my daughters"?

These lines spoken by Lear demonstrate how the King continues to cling to the belief that the "natural order" within a family should have some significance and should influence the way family members treat one another. Hence, Lear expresses his disbelief that – as far as he knows at this point – Gloucester's bastard son has proven to be a better child than his own legitimate daughters have been to him. To the audience, the lines become ironic, because Lear does not yet know that Edmund is, in fact, a disloyal and evil character; the audience is already fully aware of Edmund's true character.

6. How does Gloucester's remark "I see it feelingly" demonstrate his personal growth as a human being?

Gloucester, who has been blinded, now "sees" the world more clearly than he did when he still had his complete eyesight. His development has come full circle: He has learned that he must "feel" the world in order to develop a true understanding of the people and events around him. Gloucester's judgments are now sound, because they are not based on superficialities and appearances any more.

7. After they fight and Oswald is mortally wounded, what does he ask Edgar?

Oswald wants Edgar to bury his body and take the letter he is carrying to Edmund. He does not recognize Edgar as Edmund's brother.

8. Edgar reads the letter to Edmund that Oswald has been carrying. What information does he learn about his brother?

Edgar learns that Edmund has developed a secret relationship with Goneril. In her letter, Goneril asks Edmund to kill her husband, the Duke of Albany, so the two of them can be together.

Act IV, scene vii

1. What does the following statement by Cordelia reveal about her attitude toward her father: "Cure this great breach in his abused nature! The untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up of this child-changed father!"?

Cordelia recognizes that her father's mind has become disturbed because of the treatment he has received at the hands of Goneril and Regan. Cordelia's comments illustrate her love and care for her father. She clings to the hope that he can be cured.

2. Where in this scene does Cordelia's respect for Lear as a father and as a King become apparent?

All of Cordelia's comments in this scene display her true and honest affection for her father. Her respect for Lear as a father and as a King becomes apparent in the following lines: "How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?"

3. What does the following comment uttered by Lear reveal about his attitude toward the natural order of the stars: "I am bound upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears do scald like molten lead"?

Lear expresses his belief in the great wheel of fortune that turns and determines the fate of human beings. He recognizes that the time of his death is near, and he is suffering to be released from the movements of Fortune's wheel.

4. What literary device can be found in the above lines spoken (in Question 3) by Lear?

"Mine own tears do scald like molten lead" is an example of a simile.

5. What does Lear ask of Cordelia before he exits the stage and what realization about his error in judgment do his words contain?

Lear asks Cordelia's forgiveness. He begs, "Pray you now, forget and forgive." Lear asks Cordelia to forgive him because he has been "old and foolish." Lear seems to recognize exactly what has led to his downfall: He is too old to handle the affairs of the kingdom, but he was foolish to give his power and lands to Regan and Goneril.

6. Why don't this reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, Lear's restoration to sanity, and his newfound awareness of his human condition mark the end of the play?

In the structure of the tragedy, the hero is ultimately destroyed by forces he himself set in motion. Thus, even though Lear and his youngest, favorite daughter are reconciled, Lear still must face the forces of his other two daughters that he unleashed with his vain love game in Act I.

Act V, scene i

1. What great fear does Regan express to Edmund at the opening of the scene? What does she demand of Edmund?

Regan is terrified of the possibility that Edmund and Goneril have been intimate with each other. Regan begs Edmund not to become involved with her sister.

2. What shocking information does Goneril reveal to the audience in an aside and what does this information disclose about her character?

Goneril reveals to the audience that her relationship with Edmund is more important to her than the fight against France. The revelation proves that Goneril has no sense of honor or loyalty. She readily sacrifices the victory of her own country and troops for her passions.

3. Edmund asks an officer to determine whether the Duke of Albany is still on their side since "he's full of alteration and self-reproving." Why does Albany stay on the side of Edmund, Regan, and Goneril even though he despises their actions?

Although Albany disapproves of the way Regan and Goneril have treated Lear and Gloucester, Albany is still loyal to England. The three represent the legitimate English throne going to battle with France, a foreign power. Albany demonstrates his belief that loyalty to his country is more important than feelings of resentment. His attitude obviously stands in stark contrast to Goneril's.

4. Why does Edgar, still in disguise, wish to speak to Albany?

Edgar wants Albany to read the letter Goneril wrote to Edmund that he took from Oswald. He also promises that if Albany wishes to have him prove the contents of the letter after the battle, a trumpet should sound, and Edgar will send someone to reveal the truth.

5. What is Edmund's attitude toward the sisters Regan and Goneril, and what does his speech at the end of the scene reveal about his character?

Edmund realizes that they are extremely jealous of each other. He understands that he cannot be with either of them while the other sister still lives. Edmund resolves to let Goneril rid herself of Albany, and he vows not to show any mercy to Lear and Cordelia if they are captured. His actions and resolutions demonstrate his opportunistic nature. Edmund is only interested in his personal gain. He does not truly care about Regan or Goneril, and he is willing to sacrifice anything for his personal advancement.

Act V, scene ii

1. After leaving his father in a safe place, Edgar leaves for the battlefield, but returns shortly. What information does he reveal upon his return?

The French forces have lost, and Lear and Cordelia have been captured.

Act V, scene iii

1. What orders does Edmund give to the Captain?

Edmund orders the Captain to follow Lear and Cordelia to prison. He instructs the Captain to murder them.

2. As Albany enters, what does he demand of Edmund?

Albany commands Edmund to give up his captured prisoners, Lear and Cordelia.

3. After a brief exchange, Albany puts Edmund in his proper place. How does he do this and why?

Albany tells Edmund that he (Albany) is the one in charge; Edmund is a subject and not of equal rank. Edmund has tried to put off letting Albany see Lear and Cordelia until the next day.

4. How does Regan stand up for Edmund?

Regan tells Albany that Edmund stood in her place and functioned as Albany's equal.

5. How does Goneril react to Regan's defense of Edmund?

Goneril is not going to let her sister link her (Regan's) name to Edmund's. She says Edmund achieved what he did in his own right.

6. Following the argument between Regan and Goneril, what does Albany accuse Edmund of?

Albany accuses Edmund of treason and challenges him to a duel with Albany's "champion." Albany explains that if, after sounding the trumpet, no one comes forth to prove Edmund's treason, he himself will prove it.

7. Why does Regan feel increasingly sick as the scene progresses?

Goneril has poisoned Regan.

8. In fighting Edmund, Edgar wants to avenge his brother's "hell-hated lie." What is Edgar referring to?

Edgar is referring to Edmund's betrayal of his father and of himself. He believes that Edmund must be punished for mistreating and telling on his father and for betraying his own brother through the lies he has been spreading.

9. How does the following comment by Edmund reinforce the idea of human responsibility versus fate: "The wheel has come full circle; I am here."?

Edmund recognizes that he is being punished by the gods or by fate for the terrible deeds he has committed. He uses the image of the wheel of fortune to demonstrate that he is, once again, at the bottom and has not accomplished anything. However, Edmund, who all along has dismissed the power of the stars, merely uses the fortune wheel imagery to demonstrate that he has finally received what he deserves. His comment clearly indicates that he takes responsibility for his actions. He does not believe that he is suffering from the arbitrary decisions of the stars or of the gods; rather, he knows that he has brought his suffering upon himself.

10. What does Edgar mean when he says about his father, Gloucester, that "twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, [his heart] burst smilingly"?

This beautiful image conveys the news of Gloucester's death. Edgar explains that he revealed his true identity to his father before coming to fight Edmund. Upon hearing that his son Edgar was alive, Gloucester was overwhelmed with happiness and joy. On the other hand, he was grieved because he saw Edgar armed and ready to fight. The two competing emotions were too overpowering for his already strained heart, and he died. However, Edgar leads his audience to believe that Gloucester ultimately died content, because his heart "burst smilingly." Although his heart gave in under the pressure of all the hardship it had to endure, Gloucester died in happiness, smiling with his heart, because he had learned to "see feelingly."

11. What good deed does Edmund intend to do before he dies?

Edmund reveals that he has ordered the Captain to kill Lear and Cordelia. He sends help to the prison in order to prevent the murder.

12. Who, beside Edmund, has commissioned the murder of Lear and Cordelia?

Edmund reveals that Goneril knew and supported his plans.

13. How does Albany try to appease Lear, who is distraught over the death of Cordelia?

Albany states that he will resign the throne to Lear, the “old majesty,” and give absolute power back to the old King. Once Lear dies, Albany gives the power jointly to Kent and Edgar. He says, “you twain rule in this realm and the gored state sustain.”

14. How does Albany's final speech allude to some of the play's major recurring themes?

Albany states that we must “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,” concluding that appearances and superficialities are meaningless compared to personal relationships and human responsibility.